

## HOW TO SURVIVE WHILE WRITING

Once, several years ago, I paid a visit to Kitchen Arts & Letters, a bookstore on Manhattan's upper east side that specializes in books about food. As a then-budding food writer, it was a kind of culinary *haj*. I introduced myself to Nach Waxman, the shop's proprietor, and we had a pleasant chat—for a while. Then he asked The Big Question.

"What do you do?"

Stating what I believed to be obvious, I answered that I wrote about food.

"No, no, no," he continued, with a dismissive wave of the hand, "what do you *really* do?"

There it was.

The great existential question—the sort of thing that makes one question one's purpose in life, calculate one's self-worth. It's the sort of question that leaves one feeling a bit like Belshazzar who, you may recall (if you'd been paying attention in Sunday School), was "weighed in the balances and found wanting."

Nach is not a cruel man, just a curious one, so he was quick to add that *all* (or almost all) writers must have some other means of support, visible or otherwise. As A.A. Milne once said, "almost anyone can be an author, the business is to collect money and fame from this state of being."

Evan Biddle Shipman, an American expatriate poet in Paris and close friend of Hemingway, put it another way: "The completely unambitious writer and the really good unpublished poem are the things we lack most at this time. There is, of course, the problem of sustenance."

The age-old conflict between literary and financial success, AKA god and mammon, was demonstrated clearly by Mickey Spillane: "Hemingway hated me. I sold 200 million books, and he didn't. Of course most of mine sold for 25 cents, but still... you look at all this stuff with a grain of salt." Obviously not overly concerned about his sodium intake, he continued, "Those big-shot writers could never dig the fact that there are more salted peanuts consumed than caviar."

Samuel Johnson famously wrote, "No one but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money." On the other hand, Robertson Davies realized "There is absolutely no point in sitting down to write a book unless you feel you must write that book, or else go mad, or die." The trick to keeping these two thoughts in one's head at the same time (assuming that one is not certifiably schizophrenic) is realizing that writers must find a way to accomplish the latter while—with any luck—looking like they believe the former.